

ENGLISH SYSTEM OF FARMING IN WAIKATO



Waikato County looking toward Pirongia Mountain.

tion. That the land could not stand a value anything like £15 an acre was afterward disastrously proved.

Farm Production

Nevertheless there were many farmers who, although they indulged in land speculation as a sideline, were not prepared to sell the home farm. A thousand or so acres of flat, free-draining soil on the bank of the Waikato River provided a good place to live, and as long as the rivers were the main traffic arteries, it was the best proposition too. The names of some of these properties—Tamahere, Fencourt, Pukerimu, Pukekura, etc.—are perpetuated as names of districts in the Waikato today.

For the first 10 or 12 years the income of Waikato farmers was derived from the sale of fat stock in Auckland. The cattle were either driven to Thames and shipped by sea from there, or shipped by river to Mercer and driven from there. After 1875 cattle could be railed from Mercer, after 1879 from Hamilton, and after 1884 from Morrinsville and Cambridge. By 1875, however, Waikato stock was being undersold on the Auckland market by Taranaki. There were several reasons for this. In the first place Taranaki farmers had a fertile brown forest loam to work with; secondly, they could ship directly from Waitara to Onehunga; and thirdly, the Waikato pastures were running out. Willy-nilly the Waikato was forced into mixed cropping, with a rotation of potatoes, cereals, roots, and new grass. But the idea that it ought to be pre-eminently a grazing region, where men could "sit down at their ease and see the grass converted into beef and mutton" (6), never died out. No doubt the climate and the growth of grass round stockyards and gateways encouraged this view.

For the next 20 years the English system of farming prevailed in the

delta region, though in a modified form. During most of this period, from 1880 till 1895, the country was in the depths of a severe depression, and consequently there was a pool of unemployed men from which labourers could be drawn. That these men were a good deal different from the English farm labourers is evident from a passage in the "Waikato Times" of 1881: "The days when the farming man, if he kept sober on his eight shillings a week pay for forty years, and brought up a large family respectably without parish aid, and never omitted attendance at church on Sundays, and always took off his hat and respectfully touched his forelock to the squire and parson and all God-appointed magistrates . . . those days are gone. . . . The farmer with a few years of independence and good education, out here, offers a wonderful contrast to the old chawbacon, even as a labourer, and is sharper and shrewder, and perhaps harder and more selfish in his dealings with his inferiors, than any of his former masters." When the dairy industry became established and the cropping farms were cut up such men became the first generation of "cow-cockies."

Another modification of the English system was that artificial manures—rock phosphate, guano, superphosphate, and bonedust—were used instead of farmyard manure. Although the cattle were fed on the roots and the crop residues, they were not stalled or penned, and hence there was no accumulation of "muck" for ploughing in with the crops. At the same time there was no conservative opposition to the use of artificial manures, whose only drawback was that they had to be bought for cash and were very dear (£8 to £10 a ton f.o.b. Auckland). From 1876 lime from the Waikato quarry, where the stone was burnt with manuka, could be had for thirty shillings a ton through the Waikato

Steam Navigation Company, who would dump it at the nearest river landing.

As a result of the fertilising of the crops the pastures improved so noticeably that it became the practice to lay down grass seed with fertiliser too. An entry in the "Waikato Handbook," published in 1880, records that "last year a 28-acre old grass paddock (on Douglas's 1000-acre farm at Tamahere) was ploughed in spring, cross-ploughed in February, toppedressed with 2cwt. of Mexican guano per acre, and sown with 16lb. of grass and clover and ½lb. of turnip seed to the acre. It was sown early in March with a drill, saving one-third the seed as between sowing broadcast. It wintered 800 sheep, and the grass has now met in the drills, though in September Mr. Douglas was rather doubtful about it, thinking that the sheep had trodden the grass too much. However, it has turned out well, and is certainly a cheap way of renewing an old pasture and at the same time taking a turnip crop" (7).

With the establishment of a mixed cropping system the appearance of the countryside changed from a bare expanse of poor grass. Paddocks were subdivided and crops fenced off from stock with ditches, dikes, and hedges. English trees were planted for shade and for sentimental reasons. Ploughmanship improved and ploughing matches were held. Wire fences were adopted slowly, as wire was dear; barbed wire, invented in America in 1879, was £46 a ton in Auckland in 1882.

The mixed cropping system was only a passing phase, however, for it was displaced by dairy farming as soon as the combination of refrigeration, dairy factories, toppedressing, and milking machines made the one-man dairy farm a commercial possibility and opened the way to the purchase of land by farm labourers. The change-